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Viewing cable 08BOGOTA1656, THREATS TO PRIESTS IN SOUTHERN BOLIVAR

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08BOGOTA1656	2008-05-06 16:32	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Bogota

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 001656

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/30/2018
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: THREATS TO PRIESTS IN SOUTHERN BOLIVAR

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Three Catholic priests and ten lay workers in Southern Bolivar said they were thV8=Q'yZth links to narcotraffickers Victor and Miguel Mejia (LosMellizos). The priests believe they were targeted due to their alternative development, human rights, and social organization programs which antagonize corrupt local politicians and narcotraffickers. They said narcotraffickers have penetrated elements of the security forces--leading to human rights abuses--and complained that some African palm firms are using armed force to seize peasants' land. The GOC met with the priests to discuss their security and committed to expedited investigations. Ambassador Brownfield visited the region on April 7 to show support for local alternative development programs and social groups. End summary.

NARCOTRAFFICKERS TO BLAME

¶2. (C) Catholic priests Rafael Gallego (Tiquisio) and Leonel Comas (Arenal) told us on April 30 that they--as well as ten lay workers and a third priest in southern Bolivar--have received written death threats from "Commander Camilo" of the Bloque Norte de Colombia. The priests said Camilo appears to be tied to narcotraffickers Victor and Miguel Mejia Munera (losMellizos). (Note: The Colombian National Police killed Victor on April 29 and captured Miguel on May 1.) Gallego said they were targeted because of their work with rural residents on alternative development, human rights, and social empowerment. Their projects receive funds from the GOC's Accion Social program, and are supported by Father De Roux, a Jesuit priest and head of the Regional Peace and Development Program in Medio-Magdalena (PDPMM).

MILITARY ABUSES LOCAL RESIDENTS

¶3. (C) Gallego and Comas told us they suspect elements of the public forces are either directly supporting or turning a blind eye to the work of criminal groups and narcotraffickers in the area. They claim corruption is widespread among local security forces, noting that helicopters used by narcotraffickers in the region are clearly visible from a local military base. Coca growers openly grow their crops on hillsides, and the military does little to intervene. Gallego said the priests cannot prove the military is behind the threats, but noted that the language used mirrors military criticism of the priests as "warriors camouflaged as civilians who work against democratic security". Gallego was previously threatened by paramilitaries in 2001 because of his support for the GOC's peace process with the ELN. Gallego added that the FARC also declared the priests to be "military targets" in the past.

¶4. (C) The priests report that human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions of peasants, by the military are also common. Gallego cited the cases of demobilized FARC who work with the military and abuse their newfound power to intimidate peasants. Former FARC commander "elGato" and former Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) commander "Wilson" regularly wear Colombian Army uniforms in Arenal and Tiquisio and threaten local residents. The priests report a general distrust of the local military--the Narino and Nueva Granada battalions--among the general population. They added that the local offices of the Human Rights Ombudsman (Defensoria) do a good job in denouncing human rights abuses.

ORIGINS OF THE REGIONAL TENSION

¶5. (C) The priests claim key regional actors feel threatened by their work. Many peasants recognize the danger of

cultivating coca, and are eager to participate in the PPDMM's alternative development programs such as cacao and sugar cane. Narcotraffickers, including former paramilitaries and the FARC, oppose these efforts. In many areas, the FARC, ELN, and former paramilitaries work together on illegal drug deals. Comas said corrupt local politicians also feel endangered by the new political candidates that emerge from the Church's leadership training courses. Palm companies use intimidation and threats to push farmers to sell their land. The priests noted that many farmers are struggling to obtain land titles, but when they agree to sell to the palm oil companies, local GOC officials quickly issue titles.

GOC AND USG RESPONSE

¶16. (C) Local and national GOC officials convened three special security council meetings on the threats to priests; the first two took place at the Governor's Office of Bolivar on April 12 and 19. On April 21 in Aguachica, Cesar department, President Uribe convened a National Security Council meeting attended by Defense Minister Santos and Father de Roux. Gallego said they also met with Presidential Human Rights Director Carlos Franco in Bogota. Gallego said the GOC committed to review the security profile of the threatened individuals, expedite investigations, and assist with security measures. The priests rejected GOC offers of bodyguards, saying this would conflict with their pastoral missions. The priests plan to return to the region after one month; they fear a longer absence would lead to the collapse of their programs.

¶17. (U) Ambassador Brownfield traveled to Santa Rosa del Sur in Southern Bolivar on April 7 to show our support for alternative development programs as well as local social organizations. Father de Roux accompanied him on the trip. We will follow up with the GOC to underline our concerns with the threats. Polcouns spoke with Franco on April 30 and urged swift GOC action in the case. We also promised to participate in a high-level visit to the region that is being organized by Catholic Church officials.
BROWNFIELD

=====CABLE ENDS=====